

**JOHNSTONE CENTRE**  
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**Reflections on the Billabong**

A report from a Participatory Rural Appraisal of the Billabong  
Catchment

Catherine Allan, Allan Curtis, Andrea Grant and Libby Ellis

September 2001  
Albury NSW

Conducted as part of the Heartlands (Billabong) Project



**Natural Heritage Trust**

*Helping Communities Helping Australia*

A Commonwealth Government Initiative

**Eastern Billabong  
Landcare Groups**

Johnstone Centre, Albury, NSW

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## **BACKGROUND**

In 1996 an independent and comprehensive report on the State of the Australian Environment was published. It confirmed that Australia has serious environmental problems which need to be addressed immediately to prevent loss of productivity, biodiversity and heritage (State of the Environment Advisory Council 1996). South Eastern Australia is facing challenges such as dryland salinity, tree decline, soil acidification, and loss of biodiversity (MDBC 2001). A number of regional scale projects have been developed to help address these problems and create sustainable landscapes for Australia.

### **Heartlands Project**

Heartlands is a CSIRO/Murray-Darling Basin Commission (MDBC) initiative which is focusing on four catchments in New South Wales and Victoria. The Billabong catchment area is one of these.

Heartlands is about new ways to manage natural resources. Scientists will be working with farmers, catchment groups, local communities and state governments to:

- develop targeted re-vegetation strategies to assist with amelioration of salinity and improve water quality in catchments.
- help renew the landscape in a way that meets social and economic as well as environmental needs.
- estimate the costs and benefits of changed land management.
- give confidence about the effectiveness of various strategies trialed.



*Salt damaged farming land in south east Australia*

The Billabong Heartlands project is managed by the Billabong Operations Group, which includes local landcare group representatives, landholders, government agency staff and scientists from CSIRO in Canberra and Charles Sturt University in Thurgoona.

To help the program fit in, the Billabong Operations Group are interested in learning about the ways people value the places they live in. Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) was chosen to initiate this learning.

### **Participatory Rural Appraisal**

PRA involves a team of people with diverse technical and practical backgrounds learning from local people. They do this by listening to them and building a shared understanding of the things which they have been told (Chambers 1994).

For the Billabong PRA a team was based in Culcairn for six days in late June 2001. This team involved Andrew Lawson, Alan Kerlin (Holbrook Landcare), Hamish Cresswell, John Ive (CSIRO), Jane Rowe (Culcairn Landcare), Kylie Murray (Eastern Riverina Landcare), Libby Ellis, Sandy O'Flanagan, Joy Wearn, Carmel Roennfeldt, Malcolm Ross (landholders), Murray Brown (Farm Forestry), Elita Humphries (Eastern Murray Dryland Salinity Officer), and Allan Curtis and Andrea Grant, (Charles Sturt University Thurgoona). Team building and PRA process development was lead by Catherine Allan, also from Charles Sturt University, Thurgoona.

The mix of people in the PRA team created a diversity of questions about the Billabong Catchment, even within the context of the Heartlands project. After much reflection and discussion it was agreed that learning about achieving change in the district was a high priority. To help with this the team was interested in learning about the lifestyle choices made by residents, the strength of the communities within the catchment, who people felt should be responsible for managing natural resources, and how they perceived their catchment now, and in the future.

## Methods

Confidential interviews were conducted with 31 households across the Billabong Catchment. The initial request for an interview was made by a local person over the phone, and although a few people declined to be interviewed, most agreed to be involved. A time and place for the interview was organised, usually at the home or business of the person to be interviewed.

Many of the interviews were with individuals, but others were with couples and families. People from a variety of backgrounds were sought, including professional, business and unemployed people in towns, although the majority were farmers and other rural dwellers. Both sexes were included, with people's ages ranging from early 20s to over 80.

Each interview was conducted by two people from the PRA team, one guiding the interview while the other wrote notes. The interviews were discussions loosely structured around six questions:

- What do you like about living in this district/your place?
- Which do you think are the most important local organisations in this district?
- Do you think the district will be any different in 10-20 years from now? How?
- Do you feel your community is under any pressure? What?
- Who do you think should be involved in addressing land and water management issues in this district?
- Are you aware of any of the government programs which are attempting to change the way land is managed?

The format of the interviews encouraged people to talk about issues which were important to them, so the form and order of the questions varied in each case.

## Analysis

The outcome from each interview was a collection of hand written notes (transcripts). These transcripts could not capture the entire discussion, but what was recorded was in the exact words of the people being interviewed. Soon after each interview the interviewers jointly reviewed the notes in relation to the list of topics which the PRA team had said it wanted to explore. Parts of each transcript which related to the different topics were given labels (coded). After all the interviews were complete the coded quotes were grouped, firstly by the broad topic, then by sub-topic. At this stage a draft report was sent to all people involved in the interviews to ensure that quotes had not been taken out of context, and that no one could be identified from the quotes. Only one response was received from any of the interviewees, and that suggested that the quotes were consistent with their understanding of their community. A story about the Billabong catchment was then constructed around these topics, and representative quotes were selected to support the story. This is what appears on the following pages, with actual quotes from the interviews shown like this.



*Some of the PRA team reflecting on the interviews*

## How to use this report

This report is not intended as a definitive description of the Billabong Catchment. Rather, it is presented as a collection of insights about the catchment from some of those who live and work within it. It should be used as a springboard for further thought and discussion. Individually, or in groups you can interrogate the report. Do you agree with the comments? Disagree? Why? What was missed? What was included that should not have been? Contact details are provided on the final page if you wish to respond to the authors.

## Acknowledgments

We would like to thank all of the people of the Billabong who shared their time and their knowledge with us.

Thanks also to Tony Dunn, Charles Sturt University, Wagga Wagga, for valuable advice on PRA approaches.

## THE BILLABONG CATCHMENT

### The physical setting

#### **A healthy sustainable catchment**

The place is in very good heart, and I certainly want to keep it that way.

I've only seen it as it is, 15 years, and its been getting greener.

Sustainability is definitely there.

Areas of Billabong Creek preserved better, improve naturally. There's a lot of little beautiful areas, potential sanctuaries.

Father kept things reasonably well timbered.

Its not too bad compared with other areas, hasn't been widespread clearing of hills.

#### **Concerns**

Dams will wash out, everywhere there's gullies 10 foot deep, we have to speed things up.

Its not polluted, but the creek's in bad form.

Really need to control the salinity issue: its real and its getting worse.

Salinity's a worry for me more than anything.

[x] Creek's white with salt.

The more you learn about salt loading down the river, even if it appears to be good, there are things that need to be fixed up.

Certainly town people are terribly interested in it [salinity]. Out here everyone is very much aware of it.

At Henty field days all the farmers talking about weeds.

We've seen the pastures change in my time ... we had beautiful clover and rye in the 40s.

Land not the greatest in the world- not enough top soil.

### The social setting

#### **The people**

Holbrook's got a diverse range of people - it's a plus of this area that there are diverse people with different thoughts. You do see as much multi-culturalism here, slowly getting used to this multi-culturalism thing.

Most children come from both parents, white, father working, mother at home. Two in broken marriages out of about 80 families. No ethnic families.

Area has changed from original settling families- old family area and fairly staid. The new type of person who moves in are enthusiastic and goers.

#### **Their community**

Cookardina is a particularly good strong community with 30-40 families involved with it.

Holbrook different to other area, more settled, wealthy. Optimism in the community that it will remain viable. A family dominated culture.

Holbrook is getting stronger- so many community minded people in Holbrook, building up a place to come to.

I've been here on a Friday morning and you couldn't get a parking space. People come in for a chat. It's the people here, support local businesses, very loyal, haven't seen it before in another town.

Before we moved here people said don't move in, but we have found it very friendly. Not inviting you into their homes, but very family oriented.

It's important to be in a district where you can call on assistance from neighbours.

People are very sincere and community minded [Culcairn].

Community issues are dealt with by the community...I think that they know what they need to do to keep the community going.

Generally people are good, keep their distance, don't get too close.

### **Concerns**

Conservatism in country more prevalent...meaning lack of change, maybe more racist, homophobic.

Moving to a regional centre because Holbrook is too small. People point at you and say that's the bloke...

There's people who feel socially inferior and socially superior. Chip on the shoulder and all that.

There's some small town syndrome- everybody knows everybody's business. We have felt the brunt because if you choose to make a go of it for the kids you get the tall poppy syndrome.

Would be a better place if everyone was friends with everyone else. Reality is different, they keep to themselves because of pressures (time, food, costs etc) and pride. People don't want neighbours to know about overdraft etc, tired and busy.

There are Town and Country, they're just as bad as each other, they're all snobs. There's people you just associate with, they're so far up themselves.

Small town 'them and us' issues- townsfolk and landholders.

Still have to be here 20 years to be deemed local - that won't change...new people feel shut out.

Strength of tradition and work ethic, but risk of missing out on what's going on.



*Soil testing*

## **LIFESTYLE CHOICES**

Everyone had multiple reasons for living where they did.

### **Physical**

#### **Climate**

Guaranteed rainfall, fairly secure. Even when it doesn't rain it rains.

The soil type and rainfall- there hasn't been a year when you haven't got a hay cut.

Its good safe country- you can nearly always get a crop.

Particularly good in summer- always 5-10 degrees cooler, always a breeze, don't get frosted.

#### **Space**

I like the space, I like being connected to the land from a visual point of view, I really do like the space.

Lived here all my life- 5<sup>th</sup> generation, counts for something these days. Couldn't see myself living in the city- I enjoy the space, birds, sunrise, sunsets, clouds, -Restless Flycatcher this morning.

It's just that spaciousness, and just going out to see the grass etc. I put that into my house, with high ceilings and rooms flowing.

Neighbours 200m that way- you can shout at the kids. The garden used to be quite small, now it's about to extend to the road. I like creating things, so I've created a nice place to live.

### **Love of the district**

Beauty, diverse mix of country- production and natives. Enjoy the hills for view and beauty, flats for productivity.

... clean and fresh, beautiful hills, valleys, landscapes, personal space, diversity trees and plants, farm water.

When partnership broke up I couldn't bear to live anywhere else.....I just love the land.

### **Location**

Its close to Albury and Wagga- I like to have my bit of city, it's not far to Canberra and Melbourne.

Good situation, halfway between best sheep markets in Wagga and Wodonga.

Need to be near a large centre for education and second job.

It's close to Albury/Wagga but we're not living in a city, fresh air, things like that.

... close to Culcairn, Wagga and Albury, recreation in the snowfields, access to freight and commodities on a main railway line here, direct to Sydney, Port Kembla.

To get something major I go to Wagga, only 35 minutes to outskirts, and 25 to Holbrook, so I go to Wagga because if one bloke doesn't have something you can go to another.

Medical services in Wodonga they're excellent, very good.

Business is done at Henty, Culcairn, Holbrook but bulk of stuff comes from Wagga and Albury.

## **Social**

### **Lifestyle**

I came from Albury, I won't go back, you can go, I'm not going back. The lifestyle is good, you don't make a fortune, but it's the lifestyle.

Birthright. 3<sup>rd</sup> generation farmer, that's why I'm here, lifestyle. Thinking back 40-50 years ago, as rural Australia has turned out, I might not be a farmer. I guess you're a bit naive, I liked the lifestyle. It was good then.

Don't need much to have a good lifestyle here. If you have a job then you're doing OK.

I love my animals. It's a hobby and a livelihood.

### **Networks**

Family around us. I'm lucky enough to have a close friend in the area, network of friends is strong. Social life is important to us, family in Wagga.

Small community- close and friendly.

### **Family**

Enjoy small rural environment- have a young family, socialise with families of similar values... Rural environment has a lot to offer kids.

As a mum this has been a great place to raise our children- I like to give the best to my family, quality of life.

Growing up here in a rural environment...everything was there, just the freedom. Down the track that's what I'd be doing for my kids.

Opportunities for kids, sports, safe, don't have the worries of cities.

## **Negatives**

Love rural area and like the isolation of country living cause its good for our kids- they have to go everywhere with us. But isolation is a problem: have to go to Albury a couple of times a week, sport and other services that Culcairn can't offer.

Having trouble getting onto internet out here for net banking...being able to look up information.

But for all those things there's a cost- production per hectare. The return on capital is far better at Lockhart than Tumbarumba.



## **Choice**

I lived in the US for 2 years. I still made the choice to come back to the country town.

Conscious decision to change my lifestyle to this rural life.

When thinking about this business venture we did a lot of soul searching, but we're here because we want to be. We had a choice and decided to stay on the farm.

Lived here all my life, grew up on family property down the road...chance to stay here or leave, but chose to stay.

I was mad keen on sheep and stuff. If I left school now I'd go on a different track- now it takes 10 years to get something.

... oh you look at your parents and accept what they want. By the time Father was gone I was 50 , and I guess I could have gone, seized the opportunity...Resigned, too bloody late to do anything different.



*The Billabong Creek area*

## **SOCIAL CAPACITY**

Social capacity relates to the ability of a community to survive and prosper. It is a combination of individual's skills, the type and quantity of resources within a community, and the joint commitment to the community. The PRA team was interested in this aspect of the Billabong catchment because the success of projects like Heartlands depends, in part, on the capacity of the community to embrace and support the project.

### **Organisations**

#### **Community**

Holbrook Children's centre, CWA, things like that make up a community and keep it together.

Any town needs voluntary organisations. More important now for information as well as doing something for your community.

Women's Clubs- the Billabong women's group- raise a bit of money for charity. Red cross does some fund raising.

It's a good Rotary Club- about 10 farmers and a good cross section of people from town, a good bunch of guys, very committed. It's not a big city club- they tend to be a bit elitist. Here you take what you get.

Lions...helps contribute to community here. Quite proud of the town clock put up 2 years ago, completely paid for by Lions.

We are involved in the Church, and we think that's important as it reaches out to others in the town.

There are preschool and church groups. And the silo committee.

I'm involved in both schools and sport, my wife's involved in the book club, the girl guides.

Fire Brigade- if we're away they look out for the properties.

I belong to the NSW Farmers association and attend all their meetings.

Red Cross, Swimming Club, Pony Club; SES is a big one, its all voluntary, they get called out so much.

### **Sport**

They're all mad keen on sport in Holbrook, and they have very good facilities.

Sporting bodies are important...they're the knitting material for the community, social interaction, dances, they are good for new people, people that are new to town.

Doesn't matter where people come from, footy club brings people together, town and farm people. If you enjoy the activity everyone comes together.

There's not a lot for young people in rural towns, that's why sport is so important.

I was involved in the Pony Club. I enjoyed it and it was meeting people... It was more a youth movement, you could teach them through their horses.

To us sport is huge, entertainment for the kids, keeping them active and involved.

### **Landcare**

Landcare has taken a real jump in the last 10-15 years- people come and go. That's got a lot of people aware of what's going on in the district, aware to improve things.

Lucky to be involved with Holbrook landcare, Holbrook is lucky, it has a holistic approach. So many subcatchments doesn't matter, it still works. Had successes with awards, makes people feel good.

We have this landcare business too, of course. I go to their meetings sometimes.

## **Changes in organisations**

### **Improvement**

The Picnic [Race] Club and Race Club joined together: makes sense.

The Rural Women's Group deals with women's health, and investment- I wasn't interested in the CWA's knitting and cooking. The Rural Women's Group ran a time management course. Some women got together with Di Carpenter from NSW Ag to learn about cropping. They met once a month without feeling intimidated. The Rural Women's Group reaches people who wouldn't get off the farm much, its educational, it opens up women's minds to different ideas.

### **Decline**

We used to have a vibrant Apex Club, they folded for lack of numbers.

Lions Club have got 8 or 9 and gradually going down.

Rotary, Lions. They're finding it hard to get members, particularly 40-50 year olds.

Christian Women's Group did a lot of community work, welfare etc. They don't do the work that they used to.

Tennis club petered off in last few years.

There's... the Show Society, but its slowly dying. That was a very big social thing years ago- the Walbundarie Show was the outing of the year. Mobility has changed the lifestyle.

## **Reasons for decline**

### **Community spirit**

I feel its one of the tragedies of modern life, people don't seem to be community minded. Even the 30 year olds are not interested in Service Clubs. We have 3-4 lady members. If we want to expand we will look for lady members, they're more community minded.

Community not that important to me.

Community used to be more together: all for one. Some people feel left out, village gets left out of things sometimes.

### **Communities too small**

Even the churches, they're all old ladies very few younger people. Typical of small communities- more and more on, and less people.

The problem is there's a lot of organisations, its not easy on people full stop, digging into the same pocket all the time.

If people like something they will find other people and form a club. There's mainstreams like footy, swimming etc, but also lots of smaller clubs, sometimes to the detriment of other clubs because there are only so many people in town.

The smaller communities give you more chance to be involved in the community. There is also a greater need to be involved- less people to go around.

Local people are already stretched to the limit. It is the same faces involved in all the local organisations.

### **Lifestyles**

I haven't been involved in organisations because [farming] ties you down.

We're pretty busy with family so don't get out much. Try and get to landcare when I can.

People are busy- its hard to get to know them. We meet neighbours but don't have the time to get to know each other.

Young people are too busy to be involved, they also get jobs in town, they just don't have the time.

The CWA is diminishing, the ladies are finding it hard to get replacements because lifestyles have changed, both partners work, there's a lot more pressure on families these days.

There is less sporting teams locally now, kids are not into competitive sport. I think it is due to other distractions not available in my day, ie TV, Internet, computer games.

Rotary members think that the community service ethic is declining, but I think its because people are having families later and are therefore very involved with their families, they support the pre-school.

### **Administrative loads**

[Bush Fire Brigade] Too much legal and administration. Regulations are restrictive and forcing non participation. Risks independent groups starting up. Insurance risks, legal requirements, it's a nightmare.

I have no community involvement apart from the Fire Brigade, which is pretty important. Takes time; not so much fighting fires but all that other crap that goes on.

B&S balls gone down. B&S in early 80s raked in \$30 000, pumped back into the community, back to pre-schools, hospitals. Licensing got tight and has closed all up. Drink driving aspect changed peoples' lives.

Picnic race committee- need 1 licensed security guard per 100 people. 2000 people at races- the project would go to the hospital- had to cancel because of need and cost of security guards. Eventually lightened the regulations, but it shut down the club.

Risk that landcare over regulated. We are busier and busier, people won't continue to put time in. All due to litigation and duty of care.

Paperwork keeps changing, doesn't promote activity.

Landcare is working, would be disappointed if it gets too top heavy and administrative, like the Bush Fire Brigade. People might start to go off Landcare because of the threat to sue, and disagreement over tree species. Being forced to plant particular species. Its frustrating and the reaction is likely to be becoming not involved.

## **Services**

### **Small centres**

The Morven store closes down this weekend. Not enough volume of trade. The thing that is surviving is the Pub.

Local store and post office closing...[it's] the heart and soul of the community.

It's a struggle for small towns like Mullengandra and Woomargama.

Walla only basic foods-outpriced themselves in food items.

### **Larger centres**

I'm amazed at the services available to Henty, shops, doctor, hospital.

Culcairn has got a supermarket, chemist, doctor, hospital, library with Internet connection if you want it, reference books... Reasonably prosperous- if you go into Culcairn it looks alright with all the cars parked there.

Safest place for a vet to be in Australia is Holbrook...the area supports lots of people in the vet profession.

### **Links to surrounding farming district**

Before rain this year farmers tightened their belts or travelled further for groceries. Local supermarket felt a downturn in spending. If supermarket not getting money in they in turn cannot sponsor school sports events. Then when it rained the belt was loosened up and the dollars were spent again.

### **Changes to services**

Vital facilities going, such as banks, hospitals.

Biggest concern is the withdrawal of services, particularly banks. Very bad, businesses have to carry money. When banks go businesses go too, and others are less likely to move in.

Lack of police, and other services diminishing, is a problem.

Difficult for small town to sustain professionals.

### **Impacts**

People don't want to live in a town if there's no doctor there.

Telstra seems hopeless and sacking many hundreds of rural staff. You speak to staff with no idea of rural-looking for road numbers, street intersections, computer system wouldn't allow rural address.

Services are very important to a rural centre. If services drop people leave- especially older people. Younger people leave for lack of employment. Yerong Creek has died, but satellite effect from Wagga has positive effects, potentially.

### **Fighting back**

We started the community bank- there were 300 people at a public meeting- within 8 months we had our own bank.

Community Bank very good. Blowing people out, how much business, how much money coming in. Used to be 5 banks...Community Bank now only bank in town.

[Toxic waste incinerator] People from Sydney were very vocal, and so were we...the local hall was full. Instead of all these little groups everyone was working together.

Local communities up against big companies- if we don't support them they're gone, supermarkets going into hardware, butchers.

Never used to shop locally, but you get used to it, paying a bit more for the convenience

It's changing, it will keep changing. When I came to Henty it was like going back 15 years, not like that now. Difficult to say... I still think it will be a very active community. Very loyal, shop here.

## **Opportunities**

### **Rural living**

A rural living opportunity here. Community has all facilities- hospital, old people's home. People come here to retire.

Growing tendency for people to live here and work in Lavington. Houses cost a lot less than in Albury, and travel times less of a disincentive, nice drive and compared to Melbourne time it isn't much.

Culcairn will still be here, but unless we get employment it will be more of a dormitory suburb, but it will be a backup to the farming community.

Culcairn, Holbrook dormitory suburbs to Lavington, but will be attractive... getting people from major centres. I think the area will keep expanding.

### **Tourism**

Field Day's great for town, part of life here. It brings everyone together. Going from strength to strength, getting better, improving facilities... Rural people think they might be missing out if they're not there.

Heavily involved with Walla 125<sup>th</sup> history project and still going, our pride and joy, we've followed it through. Council backed us because of tourism, we badly need that as small towns don't have a lot going for them.

The submarine has been an absolute success. Holbrook has been given an identity, and that's important or they'll die.

Holbrook would be different if bypassed, negative impact. So many people stop at local shops and at submarine. That sub's packed at weekends.

[Money from highway] stays with people in town, but psychologically its good. If the town seems to be busy people feel good.

Think of ourselves as a tourist stop, but not a destination. Good if we could make ourselves a destination, ecotourism.

### **Industry**

Mill has changed it dramatically in a short period of time. A lot of money earned stops in the town. It [Holbrook] does depend on business, has an effect, even on schools.

Need additional industry in town- prefer ones that are sympathetic to the environment.

[There will be] more processing industries around area's products.

## **Social Pressures**

### **Community**

#### **A growing underclass**

My biggest gripe-something that annoys me-is the unemployed that come out and abuse the system.

[Holbrook]. A lot of unemployment and underemployment. Growing underclass are becoming more visible. A spate of teenage pregnancies.

Not this community, not under economic pressure, more so social pressure, we're now finding syringes in the park, there's a needle exchange in the hospital.

In Holbrook you can't sell a house, but they're hard to rent, too. The Mill industry attracts people to town, but whether they are the right people...

There's a big surge of broken families taking up residence in Culcairn, but it's still that type of person that comes for a season...Walk down the street on a Saturday morning, know one person in ten.

There is a problem like in Culcairn with people moving in due to cheaper rent there. These people are not local and are only attracted to Culcairn because of cheap rent, and they do unfortunately bring their problems with them, ie unsociable behaviour. These problems are not being addressed, maybe there is a bit of apathy, ie we don't want to know about you, maybe if we pay no attention to you it will go away. These people don't contribute to the town at all and there is a bit, a lot, of ill feeling.

Don't see any way out of it, disappointed in permanent people moving out and renting to city people who are after cheap rent- you lose stability in the town.

### **Youth**

#### **Education**

Worried about kid's future and job opportunities. No comparison with competing with city kids - might not measure up in computer environment. I want kids here to have options- don't care what they choose, but want them to have a choice.

School system standards low in small schools compared with Canberra, Albury etc- not up with technological needs. In cities its taken for granted that computers and printers etc are available. There's an expectation that families will provide the technology.

Education thing is poor. Son on bus for many hours to school- really big day, 7.15-5 pm, a huge ask for young children.

Billabong High is above average. They seem to be well catered for by feeder schools.

### **Ageing population**

Young people are leaving, the average age of farmers is high, young have all gone in some areas. In stock area very few young people, more young in cropping.

A lot of children are leaving Holbrook, 18-19, moving on.

The population is decreased- abattoir shut and kids leaving, becoming an aged population.

Drove bus for 16 years- was 41 kids, now 26 kids going twice as far.

### **Causes**

Unless prices stay up then younger generations won't come onto the land.

Instead of being at home all had to move away. There hasn't been the money to give the young blokes a living.

Am concerned about the lack of opportunity for kids. They move away to further education and they don't come back as there is nothing here for educated people, ie money.

Older people are living here seeking a way of life rather than a business. From economic point of view should sell, but personally not an option, and probably kids won't come back to farm because no money on farm and see it as hard work.

Hard to attract young people to country, not a lot for social opportunities for young people.

Lack a few opportunities in the country. Friends who live in cities went to Uni and are better off.

### **Positive prospects for youth**

Maybe [young people won't come back] but to a lesser degree. It will change but not completely. There's no shortage of people with farmed land. There's no land that's not being farmed.

A few of the older farmers are positive- they have kept up with things, their sons come back. Some of the whingeing ones too, their sons have come back. Some dads enjoy working with their sons, they have turned things around.

Culcairn is a positive area, 7 to 8 years ago there were only 4 farmers my age, now there's 10 or 12- farmers sons are coming back.

Neighbours buying up land because their sons want to stay on land.

Average age is quite young- under 45 years of age, not an average age in the country.

## **Building strong communities**

### **Leadership**

Landcare is good at getting farmers motivated but not in township. Maybe a catchment leader needed in towns to help promote landcare.

In any group- Rotary or landcare or whatever, so much depends on personality. A plus with Rotary because you're only in it for a year. A year comes around very quickly. With other committees tendency is to get a strong leader for a long time...depends on whose on the committee and who's running the show. You don't want to be on the committee all the time, but if you want it to go you have to take a hand.

I took the decision not to stay on the committee too long because people become too stuck in their ways.

[Holbrook Land and Water Plan] ..it was a good way to do it... right from the start we decided we didn't want a chairman and things, all in together... no one dominated, I think we did a very good job.

### **Group dynamics**

Groups work when they're dynamic and keep changing, that's good.

### **Participation**

When you're having a big town thing you have to get all groups to participate.

You need as many different views that you can. You also need time. Sometimes we had meetings when we didn't appear to achieve much, but next meeting we got a lot done, because we had time to think about it. If you start setting timelines, goals, you can come unstuck.

I'm the sort of person that needs to be invited to help. Some city people think they're not part of it and aren't involved. They probably would if they were invited.

Landcare, locals get involved and have that ownership. The way it is organised at present is good, government funding and volunteers providing the labour. If the community is involved they have an interest and will retain that interest/ownership- very important. There is a definite need to keep it in the community.

A lot of times Government won't do anything unless plenty of people show they're keen. Therefore its up to local people and their landcare groups to get moving and take the initiative.



*PRA team members designing the research program*

## **FARMING**

### **Current**

#### **Economics pressures**

For a while the decade of the 90s was tough...now land is worth more than it was a few years ago. People are positive because of 2 good years.

Things go up and down, in the last 10 years more bad than good, but bad years make you more efficient.

Prices at present are good, but that won't last. Taxation takes it all.

Always under pressure, financial pressure. When you do make money you have to pay tax.

Some farmers think prices are good- I don't think so when you compare it with houses and car prices.

Farming business there's not so much fat in the system as there used to be... contemporaries still have annual holidays and private schools.

The margin is getting so thin, the cost of living is rising, to have a good living, a reasonable standard of living...it isn't a thing of assets, asset rich and cash poor... its sad, a lot of people are being left behind.

#### **Impacts**

People are working so many hours that they're losing their efficiency.

Its like everything is just galloping along. I don't want to be on a computer... From 3 men to 1... for all your work you get nothing.

Blokes say "why am I doing this?" Constantly say " I should be down at the beach". Fair bit of pressure on the farms.

[Someone near] was sold up 2-3 years ago, but that was self inflicted.

On the surface people seem to be coping. One bloke had a breakdown, but he was worrying himself. He's right now.

Some of the girls have gone off to hospitals and things. When you think of it, a fair few of the girls have gone off. [to employment]

None of us are just farming now, not doing what we thought we'd be doing.

### **Causes**

The pressure is economic rationalism- pushing a lot of rural families pretty hard.

Lowering of the dollar has doubled prices for everything. Returns have been down in terms of trade- it's getting tougher all the time.

Some people have moved away, some have gone back to the farm and this places more pressure on the farm to make better income with more people to support.

Expectations are higher now. If you wanted a new header you have to slice it off the harvest.

Concerned about future of family farm. Commodity prices, cannot compete in world markets- eg [an acquaintance] used to have 3 full time workers, now none.

Costs to employ people are too high. Employ people for 1 day and take 2 days administration- it's a disincentive to employ.

Moving towards more stock and pasture improvements to help reduce sprays... It's the insecticides that are the real bad ones.

If people continue to crop like they do so it won't take it any more, won't respond to whatever you put on it, will lead to hard times unless people go back to other uses.

If you don't do any good get out. Good managers will succeed.

Some do alright, some get shown the back door. Success depends on managers and management.

## **Future**

### **Enterprises**

Reasonably similar with sheep/cattle enterprises. Soils and topography limit other productive opportunities.

There'll be some good, some bad. Hobby farming is a reasonably respectable landuse. Employ educated land managers.

Hobby farms in this area are 4000 acres- this area is attracting rich investors, many farms outside owners, do up the house, tennis courts, people don't look at the fences, pasture... More tax relief coming out of Holbrook than anywhere in Australia.

Straight economics of production systems: people will find different ways, eg olives, I would question that, but there's different forms of production... New innovative industries. Farm forestry will be a bit more important whether its pines or not.

Farms will be more specialised than a mix of enterprises - if you've got 3 or 4 enterprises and one's not performing and you don't like doing it, kick it out.

I think farming is going to be more intensive, I think they're going to grow more crops, fat lambs. I think it will be more intensive; I suppose I'm sort of resigned to it. I like to think back to what the country was 60 years ago- I know they have to develop. Everyone's trying to do more with what they've got.

The price of machinery and return on capital means we'll use contractors and more hiring of equipment.

### **Size**

There won't be anybody living here; what will happen to this place I don't know...bigger areas. You don't see Company farms, more big family farms. A lot of fences torn up on this place I reckon. Small paddocks, 30 acres, are a problem, much bigger machinery. Someone bought [a property nearby] and pulled down the fences.

Farms will be bigger, double this (1300 acres) at least. People have to eat. ... Will be less farming families buying more around them, some expand others go away. Either get bigger or get out.

I think there'll be fewer farmers farming more land; to sustain agriculture people have got to farm more land. Everybody wants to buy land, nobody wants to let it go.

Properties will be bigger, there will be fewer, well educated managers. I don't like that trend- everything's in the hands of fewer players. ..We need more competition from a bigger number of smaller hands. In the US they have laws forbidding monopolies- I think that's a better system, healthier for producers and consumers. There'll be more management jobs in farming.



## LANDUSE RESPONSIBILITIES

### Farmers

#### **Responsibility goes with ownership**

[Responsibility] The landowner's to start with. He should have the most responsibility...he makes the decisions.

Landholders have responsibility. A lot of the time it's the landholder's fault.

[responsibility] Farmers like me, extension fellas like you.

I think I can get on top of it, if you do the right things. Lucerne is important for water tables- few people doing that.

Land information is very important to farmers, as they are the custodians.

It gets back to individuals- keep some money for vermin and to control weeds...can't wait 30 years...The further the government gets out the better.

I have an agroforestry plot because the dollars are there from the government, but farmers should do it themselves.

Responsibility should rest with individual landholders, but need right amount of support. Landowner should have the most responsibility, economic, he makes the decision. Need support of "how to manage well" that support exists in urban area.

People need to take more interest- just don't take it for granted that someone else will look after it.

Maybe a levy needs to be in place for rural products to compensate for environmental works.

#### **Self interest**

Landcare has a positive impact on land values.

We do a lot of fencing and tree planting for stream protection- better for farm subdivision, stock movement, shade, windbreaks.

Not just doing things for salinity alone... Improvements not really a loss of land, not giving it away. They're making it better.

Its all connected, what we do now has a price later. Stupid things now- problems later. Good things- help our kids.

Tree planting is important to us, it's something for the kids, adding value to our property.

When handing on property to family members, sustainability has got to be in your mind all the time. Smaller farmers don't see a future for their kids on farm, so tree planting not important.

#### **Time constraints**

It's time; we can't do it. We would like to fence off areas, its not just about money, we haven't got the time.

Not necessarily money available, but farmer's time is main factor to get work done, and cash flow.

I don't have the time, once you've got a wooded area, I can see a place deteriorating because its not being addressed [weed and pest control].

Manual reasons stop us planting- time commitment, energy.

#### **Financial constraints**

Just making money. There's a lot of remnant grasses and trees that I'd like to fence off, but we've got to make money.

Farms need to be bigger to be able to afford change, ie fence out areas for revegetation.

If productivity drops off erosion works suffer. When more dollars are available, we do it.

As long as the banks got their hooks into you it takes flexibility away, not financial enough to be flexible.

Lifestyle skills very influential into what we'd be prepared to do. My skills are in cropping. Need to be financial as well. I'd be prepared to have 20% under trees and sow lucerne for manure or silage to make a difference, but money...

The problem is, is that it's probably unfair for the people on the recharge areas. They will have to take areas out of cropping- very productive land.

### **Pressured into bad practices**

Costs catch up- run 1000 sheep. Then 1500 sheep, grazing pressure.

Unfortunately due to the expense of modern machinery and fertiliser and spray farmers are forced into cropping the more marginal areas to make a living. I don't think they really see they have a choice. Its either crop more or go broke. Its hard for them when they are caught in such a position

Creek heavily livestock grazed. We can only have them in and out to stop the pressure. Large economic pressure driving land use.

Part of me wants to be organic farming - sick of all the spraying on the place...if I had an alternative to be more attractive, organic appeals to me- if profitable. The money is in producing the maximum amount of grain per hectare.

## **Larger catchment perspective**

### **Connectivity**

Catchments are all connected- if your area goes down the whole lot goes down.

We like small pictures that are part of a large picture- not just a lot of little projects, but part of large vision. Realise that what we do we are responsible for what happens 2000km downstream.

I still struggle with the idea that a drop of rain on land can be owned...We need more efficient ways of using water, there's a responsibility to people downstream.

Hills, runoff problems, salt etc. I would be annoyed if something a neighbour did influenced my outcome.

Annoyed at the bottom of the property; [noxious weed] in creek from upstream.

### **Whole community**

Ultimately it's a rural/ urban thing- farmers generating oxygen for city people. I'm not big on subsidies, but still cheaper for the government to subsidise landholder with native vegetation. It seems to me there should be a greater responsibility on the whole of Australia.

I think there are farms who carry out terrible practices and they should be slapped on the wrist, but there are a lot who want to change, so there's a case for community assistance. Perhaps it should be like the Medicare levy. Selling Telstra just to fix up the land- missing the boat, you need to educate the community, get them to accept that for a decent country they will have to pay some of their income- country people too.

Community, everybody, farmers- affects us all. Natural Resource Management is important for both upstream and downstream. My view is that if Adelaide wants clean water then everyone should contribute.

Farmers have been made to bear heavy responsibilities, have to improve ecology and run a business in a very competitive world market with ever thinner margins. Needs to be more engagement between farmers and urban people.

Maybe rural produce should be taxed at a higher rate. Maybe imports could subsidise environmental works.

If its important to government/society then they will have to help do the job.

Subsidies for tax payer- give community clearer water, environment gains from breeding more ducks, wildlife.

Need involvement of everyone, from man next door to big companies.

Urban people are drones; what do they do?

### **City attitudes**

City people don't know what goes on out here, but they don't need us.

There's a reasonable percentage of community in town that doesn't give a damn.

Urban people are quite sympathetic towards country. If there is a drought etc, when there's trouble, there's sympathy. I think they love the country. When they come to the country they can't believe it.

City people generally on the side of the farmers... Welcome city people to the farm, don't put whingeing farmer hat on.

Dominance of population in city areas, as long as it is recognised and support for rural community is there, they will be OK. City people don't understand country needs, they have their own problems.

I don't believe that you necessarily help rural communities by agreeing with them or somehow convincing them that they are disadvantaged. I don't think it helps rural communities to give city people the impression that they're disadvantaged.

City based people, emotions and not enough sense.

City people have a totally different view of shooting animals, but now that I'm living on a farm I see a different point of view...

Linda Stoner, "don't wear furs"- now can't export fox skins. Used to be able to make money from shooting foxes. What really knocked that on the head was clubbing those little seals.

I have more of a problem with the community wanting all these national parks but not looking after them... they don't manage themselves. It's getting better, but it must be managed.

### **Roles for urban people**

Landcare trying to be self funded, can't keep living on the edge like that, maybe you can get the urban community to adopt a landcare group.

Townsppeople should help if farmers want.

I'd like to see the town take a bit of responsibility for its environment and the creek. Some of the entrances to town...

Thinking on recycling, landcare, seems to come out of the city. Ideas come from in town and they are adopted.

I would let people out on the farm if they were going to help. Mad if you don't.

## **Government**

### **Funding**

Government should fund tree planting 100% since they funded people to clear.

Farming is a business, they find it hard to justify something the government should be paying for.

I think they're more trusting when they can see the government grants that can be given to help them.

Hard for farmers to make change on own, needs outside money. The harder people pushed, the less work done. Can't expect people to look at the environment in 10 year's time when the next 12 months is so important.

Back when I was doing it in the 70s I financed myself with a small loan from the soil conservation.....Wran killed all that "farmers were getting too much", quite short sighted. Some benefits in the short term, but you [people from town] benefit too.

### **Regulation**

Role for State Government, make sure strong don't trample on the weak.

Need the government involved because you need a referee. Some farmers will always try to gain advantage for their own place.

Rural Lands Protection board have to do their job properly.

[RLPBs] are becoming more popular.

Councils closing tips, people will dump in the creeks again. Councils should get stuck into chemical companies to re-use chemical drums. Farmers burn them, it's wrong, you can't get rid of them.

Grazing stock have right of way, so lessees must move stock. The rangers keep their eye on what's going on.

[water allocation] Historically fellas at Mildura have abused it. Now it should be our turn to get a bit of water.

### **Direct management of public land**

DLWC should look after [rivers and creeks]. I don't know why the Council gets involved, they both came to inspect, removing gravel from the creekbed.

Roadsides, should be Rural Lands Protection Board, these problems multiply themselves because no one will stand up and take responsibility

Weed control of Council land, stock reserve, Council don't do good enough job with weed control in comparison to people on the land who generally address weeds. Council needs to address some of their land use practices, the rubbish dump is an issue with runoff, but the Council is not addressing this.

Local government weed inspector should spend more time spraying weeds on the side of the road. Some landholders have weeds out of control, and weed inspector can't handle it.

Henry Bolte is supposed to be responsible for the carp- how true I don't know. Responsibility of government to get rid of them.

We hope national parks will control their weeds, goats, foxes, rabbits.

### **Markets instead of governments**

[Govt programs] I think these are good if government is keen to put the money in. If we are taxed less then we would have more dollars to do it ourselves. There's a lot of local knowledge, I'd prefer to use locals, not government.

Critical of schemes like QA [Quality Assurance] around at moment, eg CattleCare. These things have to be money driven, a certain perception of people doing the right thing- regulatory authority involved, monetary penalties. Need longer term gain rather than short term gain.

Most governments are only taking notice of the greenies, they are only looking after themselves. Big brother approach, little bit weary of government agencies etc.

### **Fairness**

Usually these people after the freebies are also the ones with the resources to do the job.

People shouldn't bludge off the government.

Don't like the government telling you what to do. Government needs to be careful in implementing program. Recognition that they're putting in more than they are taking out, or at least matching.

Government tells us that we can't build dams, but I see water wasted downstream.

I'd get rid of all the Rural Lands Protection Boards if I had my way. People pay the RLPB, the ranger goes 'round, but the community doesn't help you maintain your fences. They pay a pittance for the rent of the long paddock- why own land when you don't have to? The RLPB have water points- you're supposed to keep going in one direction, but they go back and forth.

Some services are out of kilter- Government told to clear, but now told to plant.

### **Administration**

Hate getting funding with all the conditions placed on it- whole lot of red tape.

Too many different funding bodies, too inefficient.

I'd like to see the government stop out of all bloody programs, bind you up in red tape. If they eased up in tax and let private enterprise have a go. Stay out, let the guys that have a bit of knowledge have a go.

I think keep it well away from government- they can't run their own business.

Advisory committee seems quite remote. Don't see it as a threat, but I was brought up thinking that you can't tell me what to do.

### **Self determination**

As landowners you don't want to be bossed by someone else- not dictated to, you can be led and advised.

I understand the whole environmental push, I don't think you need to convert the landholders, they know the issues and are carers of the land. Try to sell the idea of trees fixing everything; they know it's not that simple. Rural people are a lot more intuitive than they're given credit for. They know the problems, they know the value of trees, and how many have gone.

I feel it's the landowners prerogative, but there's issues over which the landholder has no control, the way things are so over-governed.

Don't like the 20% goals, know what needs to be done, no point putting a percentage on it. Landholders sold a bit short sometimes.

The Carr government went over the top about clearing native vegetation (SEPP 46).

Murray Catchment Board Plan is difficult to implement, needs to be done with care because people see it as threatening. SEPP 46...unacceptable the way that was brought in. The catchment plans need to be brought in sensitively, not told what to do. Might take 20 years to get implemented.



*Cropping in the Billabong catchment*

## **MANAGEMENT AND CONSERVATION OF THE NATURAL RESOURCES**

### **Individuals**

Ethic is to leave the place better than you got it. Never let your asset lose its value and deteriorate.

My aim was to look after the land and make it work for me without destroying it- lots to do, never done.

People are chucking fertiliser on, they should soil test and check before application. They could be chucking out super and lime when its not needed. Not so good for business, and could use the money elsewhere, such as on stream protection.

### **Community**

The initiatives of landcare, and Heartlands project, made people more aware of the environment, and that will improve.

Farms get waterlogged- need cooperative solutions, to get waterways to drain water away, but farmers won't cooperate, you can't get farmers interested...Soil acidity is an example of how a problem was handled better by the whole farming community.

### **Revegetation and vegetation management**

Bald Hill- dead stringybark hill- exciting that it will be planted.

Things planted now, in 10 years time they'll be recognisable in the landscape, and it will be a desirable place to be, and our place will be part of that.

...tree planting, fencing remnant vegetation, perennial pasture, bore monitoring... I think these programs are terrific. Rebirding project is fabulous.

Fencing off remnant vegetation seems to be on the right track.

Land [is] capable of repairing itself if you give it a go.

Like to see environment large enough to see a sustained increase in animal and bird numbers.

I feel native wildlife/fauna, shrubs and trees makes a more equal balance.

### **Waterway management**

Fencing off creek takes five years to show- can't see it being a bad thing, trees along creek will be good. Dread to think what goes down the creek when stock are in it.

TSRs being closed to grazing on Ten Mile Creek. I think this is wonderful. Some creeks have had cows all over.

Preventing erosion [important]. Creeks fill up and more land is lost. A lot in some areas.

### **The future**

The country will appear to be quite treed because the creeks will be planted.

Reserves and farming grounds will be a bit healthier- what we're doing with streams and erosion.

More planting for economics and recreation.

This property will look great in the future. Already 10% of land for revegetation, rebinding, regeneration, controlled grazing. Wouldn't be happening without government assistance. Whole community needs to be contributing to changing unsustainable practices of the past.

In this area, from Holbrook to Culcairn, there'll be soil problems, environmental problems. People are more aware, they've planted trees in our area, bringing the birdlife back, insects in cropping area. People are now starting. In 10 years it will be so much better.

The initiatives of landcare and Heartlands project made people more aware of the environment and that will improve.

Face of Holbrook changing rapidly. Properties without trees talked about by neighbours- peer pressure.

### **Cautions**

Die-back is a problem with local species issue, ie red gums not good as they are the ones that get hit. Need to rethink use of indigenous stock.

Driving around the countryside with pines is not attractive- prefer native trees more, although understand that pines is an industry.

It sounds terrific, fence off the creeks, but it's great for foxes, rabbits.

Mixed feelings about greater number of wildlife (eg kangaroos) - can impact negatively on production.

When I was 10 we hardly saw a kangaroo (I made a lot of money out of shooting rabbits). Now they're becoming a menace; I bet my electric fence will be shorted out when I get up there, they get into the crop. They've given the neighbours 100 tags to shoot them out, but we'll never shoot them out. They bugger the fences up, they make a hole and they're through... Feral cats are building up- good pelts on them- everywhere. They eat the little marsupials.



*Native trees ready for planting*

## **INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION**

### **Information**

#### **Availability**

We all want and need funding, but that alone won't get the job done. I'd really like clear, easily accessible information, key trees, fact sheets : fairly quickly find out key facts that don't take long to read.

I find it hard to know what government departments to go to, where to get information.

I would like the CSIRO to let us know what's happening in the district.

Some of it's advice, who can come out and say "you've got Paterson's Curse in your scrub, this is what you should do"? Our place is declared a wildlife refuge, Parks and Wildlife can't help, they're understaffed.

Now landholders are doing it on their own, not a good scenario to leave it in their hands... governments that actually "do" something are not there, they are planning people ...I can't see the government throwing enough resources to keep it up. Not enough money, technical support, local advice, government has no training component.

#### **Non local sources**

Education is the biggest thing for the future-continued education, magazines, jump on the web, the information is out there, it's the time you've got to spend to do it, updating your memory bank.

[...a good farmer] looks after the land, environment protected, financially well managed and have to be active members of the community. Primarily a matter of education.

Wagga Institute, good basic research done for rural people. In other areas you don't see the same motivation to do things: research or educational institutes close by to disseminate information.

It'll be interesting to get that information from the plane-the aerial mapping- about how bad salinity is. It could be a problem and people think that they don't need to plant trees.

Lutherans from Germany very stable community, very traditional, however, we need to keep up landcare education to expose them to things outside traditional activities.

#### **Delivery**

If someone comes in and tells us how to do something, unless they're tactful, we'd tell them where to go. But through education, carefully handled...

Depends on the person, got to be the right person.

...gives people time, calling in and talking... People that understand our situation, and taking the time.

I'd like it to come to me, rather than searching for it, internet. Difficult to get out here, and want to be with family at night.

Albury girls [agronomists] are changing all the time. I've grown up with blokes, so I relate better to them.

Yeah, if I wasn't sure about something support is there...plenty of support in town... [X] comes out and says "have this and this, maybe not this, what about this one", then comes back. I've learnt from him.

Landcare in Holbrook, support is very young, no baggage, they're at their best.

A very subtle way of changing things, all the young people as advisers and managers. I have a [young relative], passed some degree, and has a very good position, but I wouldn't have confidence in her ability.

Councils could have an environmental officer. They could make every landholder aware by personal contact. Only way it gets across.

[Local government] involved in management of a noxious weed that I've had here. They've been particularly good, not Jackbooty types.

[Landcare information] should be discussed in schools. Kids and people need to know the cause and effect. Studies have been done- communicate the information. More useful than knowing that they have evolved from apes.

### **Information overload**

So much information out there, and we don't use half the resources available.

Absolute information overload, sifting and culling through all of this...65 emails last night to download.

Information is important [but there's a need] for switching off at the end of the day, rather than working at night.

### **Local sources**

There's nothing like practical knowledge. That's one of my big disappointments, not being able to pass my knowledge on- jack of all trades, master of none-, now if I go...for instance blowfly. The books will say that sheep will be struck, but I can tell you which one's will be struck. You can't get that out of a book.

Bush telegraph biggest form of communication- learn from each other.

Discuss concept with someone, and have a really good conversation- find out extra things, like really good fencing contractors.

[Landcare] good program...they know what they're talking about, wide range of inputs and information trickles down. It would be good to see practical and theory both involved. No good just with theory.

Feel over the years, listening and reading, the Hume Dam and Creek Management came from people not living in the area. We argued when flood warning, they wouldn't listen to locals, and were wrong. Education didn't make up for knowing. Management **must** listen to local people, our ideas and knowledge are worth a lot more.

People go to uni and get the theory but haven't got the practical experience. Need to listen to the locals.

Must be give and take-negotiation. Can't be directed by ex-uni people with no practical knowledge.

Yes, I think landcare is important, Departments, research people... Need to work hand in hand. We have the practical knowledge, but not the factual background.

### **Confidence**

Wildlife, no information/field days, especially field days are mainly about trees and fencing, erosion etc.

Soils generally overlooked, marketable issues seem to get all the attention. They're all linked... The Department used to fill the void/gap, now that's not there. Need issues integrated better, that's a big issue.

Making it sound worse than it is.

Running around and turning small issues into big things, and get dollars to support marketed issues. I lack confidence in the extent of many issues.

I think there will still be increasing salinity even though we are revegetating. Not sure if we are addressing the real problem or just doing ad hoc.

All this revegetation and more trees leads to less water penetration and less runoff.

Twenty ha going in this year. Feel that this won't contribute much to salinity. Perhaps perennial pasture on break of slope more effective.

We'd have to fence too much land, cover all areas and make sure its beneficial, instead of just doing it. Sounds good at the time, but long term will it do the job?

Don't know if fencing creeks is going to work, it might be a waste, some do, some don't. Grab the money because it's there, that's a bad attitude, not knowing if it works or not. It's wrong to grab money for their own gain, not what it's there for.

Europeans introduced the redfin and killed out all the blackfish. The water used to be clear, you could swim in it. Now it's filthy and stinks. Fencing off and letting the grass grow won't fix it: it's the carp.

All this tree planting won't amount to much here- perennial pasture and lucerne would achieve more.

I am cynical about knowledge or government ideas today, seem to be tomorrow's mistakes.



### **Learning from the past**

A lot of people look at older people in their 70s, 80s, 90s, they've had that many years of experience- it wouldn't hurt to have their input...they could be the thing put into a strategy to keep it moving forward, because they have seen a lot of change.

Historically, what we know now we didn't know before, deep ploughing and such, clearing trees wasn't sustainable. We've moved on from that.

Clovers were great originally but lack of education about soil health and soil acidity- now back on track.

You can't stop the water, but you can slow it down. ...Father said it would never work, but it did...keep the plough out of the watercourses. ...old fellas... used to plough, too hard to pull the tines out. Hydraulics now.

My peers are not just following the example of fathers.

Younger people in community so keen to seek out knowledge, more so than older.

Its great to learn from your dad, but its good to go away.

Still making your own history. What you're doing in 50 years time is history.

## **Communication**

### **Involving the whole community**

Public meeting to kick off Land and Water management Plan, 150+ people, many of them from town. Certainly the rural community understands it.

Need a whole mix of people working together, politicians, landholders, experts, everybody. It hurts me to say it, I suppose we need the politicians as well. Dollars come from somewhere, politicians.

You need to get people involved rather than imposing restrictions- discussion groups.

In Land and Water Management Plan we tried to make sure we had a good cross section of people in the planning committee, not necessarily all farmers, not just bloody cockies looking for handouts to fence paddocks.

People making the decisions really need to sit down with the people who it's going to affect, had to be more give and take, more negotiation. If everyone puts in and has a part of it, if everyone listens to each other and gets a consensus, I think it would work. Need a balance of older and younger views.

### **Co-ordination**

So many agencies or groups doing so many different things, not well co-ordinated. They need to talk to themselves and communicate with the community [organise] large scale community involvement in planting.

... information out into the community, getting better. Difficult to get information from catchment leaders to land managers. Breakdown in getting information out to the farmers.

A partnership is the most successful way. Within these partnerships if people are collecting information, this information needs to go into a library.

### **Clear vision**

Needs to be more of an approach which standardised what might be expected- a profile of what's realistic, where it is on the scale of other things.

Does need communication. People need to see what the problem is, need to be clear about what needs to happen.

## **INTERVIEWS SUMMARY**

The general perception of the physical state of the Billabong Catchment was one of a pleasant, healthy, productive area. There were minor concerns over agricultural problems such as waterlogging, salinity, soil acidity, pasture decline, and weeds, but on the whole the “report card” for the area was very good to excellent.

Despite this apparent good condition, many people thought revegetation and native vegetation preservation were important priorities, although a few were uneasy with being regulated in this area. Waterway management prompted a mixed response, with some people expressing relief that the creeks were being improved, while others were sceptical that fencing would achieve positive outcomes. Even more mixed feelings attended issues of wild animal management. Some people expressed a desire for more native animals in the area, while others were concerned about loss of amenity and farm returns from increased pest numbers.

Most people spoke enthusiastically about their district. Reasons for this included good climate, empathy with the land, space, and proximity to bigger centres and services, and just a generally good lifestyle. The area was considered excellent for raising a family, although education and prospects were considered to be poorer than in city areas.

There was also a general perception about the people of the Billabong Catchment, that they had their own distinctive identity. This seemed to encompass well known “country” traits, such as community spirit, willingness to work hard, and friendliness. Many people felt themselves to be part of a happily diverse community, but there was also evidence of divisions, mainly relating to perceived social inferiority/superiority.

Local organisations were considered by most people to be vital for the community. Scores of organisations were mentioned by name, including service clubs, church and associated groups, school and pre-school committees, women’s groups and farmer associations. The Bush Fire Brigades and landcare groups seemed to be particularly important, but the most frequently mentioned organisations were sporting clubs, which were seen by many to hold communities together. Not everyone was involved with community groups, and many groups were changing. Most service clubs and church groups were declining in numbers, and Show Societies were under pressure. Many people felt that local people were spread too thinly, and that legislative requirements were adding to clubs’ problems. The social life of the district was also thought to be changing, with everyone too busy with work and family to give time to their social networks.

Local services were also seen as vital to the area, with doctors, hospitals, banks and supermarkets topping the list. Services also seemed to be declining, especially in the smaller towns in the catchment. People are more confident of their service base in Henty, Holbrook and Culcairn, although the withdrawal of banks was a much discussed topic. This withdrawal provided an opportunity for Henty district people to work together to set up a community bank to serve their needs. Many people felt that towns and services needed active support such as this, while others also saw new opportunities in becoming satellite towns for Albury/Wodonga and Wagga.

Some social pressures on the district were acknowledged. There was concern that cheap rent and industries in some towns attracted short term tenants, some of whom added to largely undefined social problems. Economic pressures, including globalisation and economic rationalism and increased expectations, were seen to impact on farmers, forcing them to work harder for lower returns and reduced satisfaction. Off farm income was also becoming important as an adjunct to farming. Some people stressed the need for farming to be approached like other business ventures.

Many people talked of an exodus of youth from the district, leading to an ageing population in the towns and on farms. However, in the cropping areas especially, there were signs that this trend was reversing, with young enthusiastic farmers becoming more plentiful.

Despite the decline in services, and concerns about prospects for younger people, the overwhelming feeling about the district was one of optimism. This was explicitly tied to the strength of spirit of various communities in the district. Good leadership was considered essential to maintain strong communities, along with good communication and inclusiveness.

Owners of land- farmers and governments- were considered as having primary responsibility for maintaining and protecting that land. There was acknowledgment from many people, however, that much was being asked of farmers in terms of time, and money outlaid or forgone for community benefit. Others felt that these works benefited their farms now, and in the future. For some farmers land management works such as treeplanting were dependent on good financial times. Some also acknowledged that they were pushed into detrimental farming practices by current economic imperatives. The off site impact of environmental works was a concern, with increased pest numbers and reduced water availability mentioned.

Most people felt that the whole community should take some responsibility for environmental management, either through taxes, levies, paying more for goods or even physical assistance to farmers if it was wanted. City people were seen as different from local residents, although there were differing opinions about whether city people valued the country or not. There was some resentment about city values and emotions impacting on country, especially farming, activities.

Local landcare programs were generally viewed in a positive light, especially for providing information, co-ordination and motivation for land management programs. The inclusiveness of landcare was seen as one of its great strengths. There was, however, some concern over possible over-administration.

Government at all levels was seen to have some responsibilities for land management. Most people were content to leave management of Travelling Stock Reserves under the direct management of the Rural Lands Protection Board. Local government was felt to be important for information provision, as well as having a waste management role. State and federal governments provided a refereeing function, to ensure that landholders don't gain unfair advantages over others in resource distribution or off site disputes.

There was no clear district response about government funding of land management programs. Some people thought government money was essential, while others thought the government should have no involvement at all. While some were urging people to use incentive money to hasten works, others felt that using incentives was lazy and unfair.

Good information was seen as essential for good land management. Outside and technical sources were welcomed, but there was a strong emphasis on the value of local and practical knowledge. Many people were also clear on how they wanted their information, with personal contact from a respectful person preferred. They would not tolerate being told what to do, but would welcome information to help them make decisions. A few people felt that they were already overloaded with information.

While most people were confident that current ideas about managing natural resources were correct, others were less sure. Learning from the past was mentioned, but mainly in the context of learning to manage change, and to avoid mistakes made by previous generations.



*Lunch at the Morven Hotel during a farm forestry field day*

## **DISCUSSION**

The common perception of the condition of the catchment is at odds with the urgent messages coming from the reports such as the State of the Environment Report (State of the Environment Advisory Council 1996) and from gatherings such as the recent Murray-Darling Basin Commission Forum (Murray Darling Basin Commission 2001). Can the Billabong Catchment really be so different from the rest of the Murray-Darling Basin? If so why? If not, does the community need different information from that which it currently has access to?

Is there, as it appears, general agreement that the district people's relationship with the land is and should be one of benevolent exploitation? If so, there is still disparity between different individual's concepts of what constitutes "good" land management. Issues such as biodiversity decline were approached cautiously, usually around an unspoken assumption that tree planting and 'landcare' were good things, if they could be afforded. How does this idea sit within the district's excellent environmental (self) report card?

The general perception of social cohesion in the district also bears close examination. A strong sense of identity may bind a community together, but it may also make it less open to new people, or new ideas and ways of thinking. To what extent does an idea of a maintaining a common front inhibit the forming or expression of opinions which are different from the mainstream? Does it inhibit the seeking and acceptance of ideas and practices from outside the community? Is the community as inclusive of a diversity of ideas and people as was claimed?

Ways of learning and storage of information impact greatly on "community" knowledge. The value of scientific and technical knowledge, often coming from outside the district, was not universally accepted, but there was strong confidence in local and practical knowledge. How can these two forms of learning inform each other to strengthen community learning? How can local knowledge be shared and stored?

## **CONCLUSION**

This Participatory Rural Appraisal sought to understand ways of achieving change in the Billabong Catchment through listening to and learning from a sample of catchment residents.

The process encouraged stronger personal ties both within the interdisciplinary PRA team, and with individuals throughout the Billabong Catchment.

The insights gained through the interviews and their subsequent group review can provide a starting point for further sharing of opinions, knowledge and ideas on ways to achieve sustainable landscapes and communities within the Billabong Catchment.

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## **PRA TEAM MEMBER PROFILES**

### **Andrew Lawson**

Implementation Officer for the Upper Billabong Land & Water Management Plan (LWMP). Employed by the Holbrook Landcare Group. Responsible for implementing actions outlined in the Plan, which was developed in consultation with the local community by a working group comprising mostly local people. The Plan aims to deal with long term and regional land degradation issues by finding common ground with local priorities. This seemed entirely consistent with the aims of the PRA - to listen to local concerns, points of view and visions for the catchment. This understanding is vital for implementation of Heartlands - environmental science and agronomy are only part of the picture - our implementation efforts will stand or fall on our understanding of local people's values and perspectives.

### **Elita Humphries**

After growing up and studying in Melbourne, Elita spent more than 4 years teaching at Dookie College (University of Melbourne) in their Natural Resource Management Program. She moved to Wellington, NSW, to work with the Central West Catchment Management committee developing a salinity risk assessment for the Maquarie, Castlereagh and Bogan Catchments. Currently working in Albury, Elita provides support to landcare groups in the area dealing with salinity and its future management.

### **Andrea Grant**

Andrea is a social researcher. Originally from Sydney, where she obtained a Bachelor of Science, she has lived in North East Victoria for the past 3 years. Andrea is interested in people and the environment working together.

### **Joy Wearn**

After growing up on the family sheep farm at Dunkeld, Western Victoria, Joy spent time as a Jillaroo, then ringer on a cattle station in South Australia. After the practical experience came the theory at Orange Agricultural College, where she gained an Associate Diploma of Farm Management. Another year Jillarooing, then 4 years travelling in the USA, Canada, Mexico, South America and the UK. Back in Australia Joy was a guide/cook with AAT Kings before meeting her future husband in Darwin. Following 2 years in Sydney they purchased land near Holbrook where they run Angus, Merinos and Crossbreds, and are embarking on a new enterprise of farm forestry. Joy has been secretary of the Holbrook Landcare group for the past seven years.

### **Kylie Murray**

Kylie, who is based in Henty, works for the Eastern Riverina Landcare Network (ERLN), which consists of 8 Landcare Groups and one Junior Landcare Group, covering an area of about 350 000ha. The ERLN works closely with Holbrook and Culcairn Landcare Groups, a relationship strengthened through the Heartlands program. Kylies feels that her relationship with members of these groups and others from the area has been reinforced through involvement in the PRA. Interviewing people from other areas of the catchment helped Kylie to look outside her area, and she feels this was one of the best outcomes of the PRA.

### **Murray Brown**

Born and raised in a family of orchardists and irrigation farmers at Invergordon Victoria, Murray completed high school in Numurkah then obtained a Forestry degree from the University of Melbourne. After travelling around Australia Murray has held various fire, forestry and timber mill related jobs. He has assisted landholders with farm forestry through Murray Riverina Farm Forestry for the past three and a half years. Murray and his family live, crop and plant trees on a 240 acre hobby paddock at Bowna. He supports conservation with sensible, sustainable utilisation for profit.

### **Sandy O'Flanagan**

From the Woomargama area, Sandy is am deeply interested in locally native plants, and enjoys nothing better than strolling around in the bush searching for different plants. She enjoyed the PRA, finding out what people thought about their part of the catchment, and meeting all those who took part.

**Malcolm Ross**

Malcolm has lived in the Holbrook area all his life (well, 56 years of it so far!) growing up on and later managing his family's property, and raising his own family there. As well as this long-standing interest in the Billabong catchment and its land use and environmental and community issues, Malcolm has worked as a co-ordinator of technical tours, a group facilitator and creative thinking consultant, and in the field of commercial mediation and conflict resolution.

**Jane Rowe**

Jane works as the part-time coordinator for Culcairn Landcare Group and is a member of the Heartlands team. She lives with her family on a property in the Culcairn district, an area she really loves. Her experience with the PRA team has been very valuable and she felt it a privilege to work with the other team members.

**Hamish Cresswell**

Hamish joined CSIRO in 1990 after completing a B.Agr.Sc. and PhD. at Lincoln University, Christchurch, New Zealand. Hamish's soil physics research theme has been combining soil hydraulic property measurement and prediction with field monitoring and the use of one dimensional soil water simulation models. His research activities include combining field measurement with soil water and cropping systems simulation models to quantify the effects of farm scale management strategies on long-term deep drainage. Hamish is involved in the CSIRO Land and Water Quantitative Land Evaluation Research group.

**Libby Ellis**

Libby lives with her family on a farm in the Alma Park area. She is variously qualified and a member of the Alma Park Pleasant Hills Landcare Group. One of her interests is Landcare and natural resource management and the social implications of these in rural communities.

**John Ive**

A research scientist of 35 years standing with CSIRO, John has researched agricultural systems including pasture and cash cropping components for the Top End of the Northern Territory for 8 years. This was followed by developing land use planning techniques to accommodate conflicting interests of diverse stakeholders with studies undertaken from the forests of south-east NSW, to the pastoral lands of the North-east Goldfields of Western Australia and many places in between. John has a family farm in the Yass area, specialising in superfine wool and feed lot cattle, while actively alleviating environmental degradation, and is a Landcare group member. John manages a portion of the Heartlands initiative, with particular interest in the components directed at restoring biodiversity, catchment scale economic analysis and dynamic catchment design. John feels the PRA provided him with an opportunity to gain a greater understanding and appreciation of the issues facing Billabong Catchment residents.

**Alan Kerlin**

Alan Kerlin started as the Holbrook Landcare Support Officer in July 2000. Previously he was a Councillor at Maroochy Shire Council on Queensland's Sunshine Coast. As a Councillor, Alan had a particular focus on environmental issues, including conservation, catchment planning, water & wastewater, waste management, and strategic land-use planning. He also spearheaded the Shire's Greenhouse Action Plan.

**Allan Curtis**

Allan is a senior lecturer in resource management in the School of Environmental and Information Sciences and Associate Director of the Johnstone Centre, both located at Charles Sturt University, Albury. His research examines aspects of rural development and conservation of biodiversity on private land. He has a professional and personal interest in landcare, having undertaken nationally significant evaluations of landcare, as well as initiating and co-ordinating the Huon Creek Landcare group education project for 10 years.

**Carmel Roennfeldt**

Carmel and her husband run a property near Culcairn, where they are always busy with their cattle, their quarry and cropping. Carmel enjoys all aspects of farming life, whether it's working in the home and garden or driving tractors and trucks. She sees herself as a wife, a mother and a farmer, working for her children's future while caring for the land.

**Catherine Allan**

Raised in Benalla, Victoria, Catherine was employed for 14 years by various land management agencies in South Australia and Victoria. She provided soil conservation, vegetation management and group skills information and advice to farmers and landcare groups, and learned much from them in return. Catherine has lived in the Albury district since 1993, and is currently a doctoral student Charles Sturt University.



*From left Joy Wearn, Elita Humphries, Sandy O'Flanagan, Alan Kerlin, Libby Ellis, Malcolm Ross, Hamish Cresswell, Allan Curtis, Murray Brown, Catherine Allan, Jane Rowe, Andrew Lawson. Missing from photo Andrea Grant, Kylie Murray, Carmel Roennfeldt and John Ive.*

## **RESPONSE**

Hopefully this report will add to current discussions within the Billabong Community about how to achieve sustainable landscapes and healthy communities.

Feel free to discuss it with your family, friends and in community groups of all sorts.

If you would like to respond to the PRA team about anything in this report you can do so in a number of ways:

You can contact Catherine Allan

Phone: 02 60 519781

Fax:

Email: [callan04@postoffice.csu.edu.au](mailto:callan04@postoffice.csu.edu.au)

Charles Sturt University

PO Box 789

ABURY 2640

Or you can respond to any of the PRA team:

**Holbrook Landcare:** Andrew Lawson, Alan Kerlin

**Culcairn Landcare:** Jane Rowe

**Eastern Riverina Landcare Network:** Kylie Murray

**Billabong landholders:** Libby Ellis, Sandy O'Flanagan, Joy Wearn, Carmel Roennfeldt, Malcolm Ross

**CSIRO:** Hamish Cresswell, John Ive

**Murray Riverina Farm Forestry:** Murray Brown

**Eastern Murray Dryland Salinity:** Elita Humphries

**Charles Sturt University Thurgoona:** Andrea Grant, Allan Curtis